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Middle English

So now they have made our English tongue a gallimaufry or hodgepodge of all other speeches.

—EDMUND SPENSER

Outer History

Linguistically, the English language between the mid-eleventh and the sixteenth centuries is sufficiently homogeneous to justify the single label of “Middle English.” The political and social status of both the language and its speakers changed greatly during this period, and three distinct subperiods can be identified: the sudden decline in the status of English after the Norman Conquest, the gradual re-emergence of English as the national language, and the rise of a standard form of the language superimposed upon the many English dialects.

1066–1204: ENGLISH IN DECLINE

The Norman invasion is arguably the single most cataclysmic event in English history. It was the last—but the most thoroughgoing—invasion of England by foreigners (see Figure 6.1). It unified England for the first time in its history. And it was the most important event ever to occur in the outer history of the English language. Politically and linguistically, it was a French conquest of England. Ethnically, it represented the last of the great Germanic invasions of England.

William I (William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy) was a descendant of Rollo the Dane, the Viking who had terrorized northern France until, in A.D. 911, the harassed French king, Charles the Simple, was forced to conclude an arrangement with him similar to that King Alfred had made with the Danes

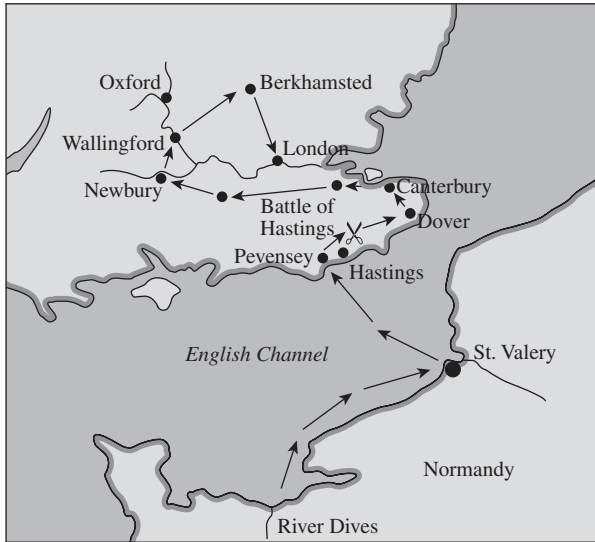


FIGURE 6.1 William the Conqueror first moved his invasion fleet from the River Dives in Normandy to St. Valery. The fleet landed at Pevensey without opposition and William defeated Harold Godwinson at Hastings. Dover was the next target; William needed the Channel crossing point. Canterbury fell and William marched to London. He was forced back and marched around London via Newbury and Wallingford to Berkhamsted. Here the Archbishop of York and the earls met William and accepted him as their new king.

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in England a few years earlier. Rollo and his followers took control of the area of northern France that became known as Normandy (Norman = “north man”). The Normans soon gave up their own language in favor of French, but it was a French heavily influenced by their original Germanic dialect, a fact that was much later to be of significance in the ultimate resurgence of English in England.

Following his defeat of Harold Godwinson at Hastings in 1066, William rapidly subjugated the rest of southeast England. Rebellions in the north and west of England delayed his securing of these areas, but within about ten years after the Conquest, all of England was firmly under William’s control. Most of the Anglo-Saxon nobility was killed, either at Hastings or in the subsequent abortive rebellions. The remaining English speakers accepted William’s kingship with resignation if not enthusiasm. One of the reasons for this relatively easy acceptance was that William brought the land more unity, peace, and stability than it had experienced for generations. During his reign, the Viking attacks ceased. The numerous internal squabbles came to an end. William established a ring of castles on the Welsh borders and thereby kept the Welsh under control. William himself was a stern and ruthless ruler, but he was not genocidal; his subjugation of England was a business matter, not a holy war. Where existing

English laws and customs did not conflict with his own regulations, he allowed English practices to remain.

William replaced Englishmen with Frenchmen in all the high offices of both state and Church, partly to reward his French followers for their support, partly because he, justifiably, felt that he could not trust the English. Even the scriptoria of the monasteries were taken over by French speakers (although at Peterborough the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* continued to be written in English until 1154).

Along with his French officials, William also imported the principle of the feudal system, the notion of the state as a hierarchy in which every member was directly responsible to the person above him in the hierarchy. Vassalage was hereditary from the dukes directly under the king at the top to the peasants at the bottom. Although these peasants were not slaves, they were bound to the land. Hence the English speakers of one area had few opportunities to communicate with those of other areas, and dialectal differences among the regions increased. There were few towns of any size where speakers from various areas could congregate, thereby reconciling the most outstanding dialectal differences. Without literacy and a standard written language—or any written language at all—to act as a brake on change, dialectal differences in English proliferated.

During much of the Middle English period, the kings took French wives and spent most of their reigns in their extensive possessions in France. They did not speak English at all, though some of the later kings apparently understood it. The English court was a French-speaking court. Indeed, some of the finest French literature of the period was written in England for French-speaking English patrons by Anglo-Norman writers including Marie de France, Wace, Bérout, and Thomas of Britain.

The linguistic situation in Britain after the Conquest was complex. French was the native language of a minority of a few thousand speakers, but a minority with influence out of all proportion to their numbers because they controlled the political, ecclesiastical, economic, and cultural life of the nation. The overwhelming majority of the population of England spoke English, but English had no prestige whatsoever. Latin was the written language of the Church and of many secular documents; it was also spoken in the newly emerging universities and in the Church. Norse was still spoken (but not written) in the Danelaw and other areas of heavy Scandinavian settlement, though it was soon to be assimilated to English, its influence being restricted primarily to loanwords in English and to dialectal peculiarities of the area. Beyond the borders of England proper, Celtic languages still prevailed in Wales and Scotland (where a new standard Scots English was eventually to develop, based on the English of Edinburgh).

Within a short time after the Conquest, there was probably a fair amount of bilingualism in England. Even if the kings had no English, most of the nobility would have had to learn English words in order to communicate with their Anglo-Saxon underlings. Estate officials and household supervisors must have used English to give orders and to receive reports. Even though the kings usually did not take English wives, many of the nobility soon did; the result would have been bilingual children. Even if both the lord and his lady spoke only French, they

probably had English-speaking nurses for their offspring, and the children learned English from these nurses and the other servants. Conversely, many Anglo-Saxons would have attempted to learn French as a means of improving their social and economic status. From the beginning, English speakers would have become familiar with such French words as *tax*, *estate*, *trouble*, *duty*, and *pay*. English household servants would have learned French words like *table*, *boil*, *serve*, *roast* and *dine*. From French-speaking clergy, the English would have learned such words as *religion*, *savior*, *pray*, and *trinity*. Most of these words do not appear in written English until after 1204, but only because little written English has survived from the period of 1066–1204. When such words do appear in writing, they are used with the confidence of familiar, universally known words.

1204–1348: ENGLISH IN THE ASCENDANT

King John of England lost, in 1204, all of Normandy except the Channel Islands. Thereafter, landowners who held possessions in both France and England were forced to give up their lands in one of the two countries. Although vast parts of southern France remained under nominal English control, they had always been too far away to support the easy and continuous intercommunication that had previously characterized England and Normandy.

With the loss of Normandy came a predictable decline of interest in France and French among those Anglo-Norman landholders who had opted to stay in England. This lack of interest—even hostility—to French was only exacerbated by the fact that the French that they spoke, by now a recognizably different dialect called Anglo-French, was ridiculed by speakers of the rising standard French based on the Parisian dialect. There could have been a reversal to the decline in the influence of French in the mid-thirteenth century when King Henry III of England brought in hundreds of French acquaintances and gave them official positions in England. However, these newcomers were speakers of Central French and were loathed by even the Anglo-French speakers, so Henry III's francophilia had little permanent effect on the erosion of French in England.

Even as the loss of English possessions in France was making French a less important language in England, other conditions were contributing to the rise in use and prestige of English. Among them was increased communication among English speakers of the various regions. This intercourse led to a smoothing out of the most striking dialectal differences and to the beginnings of a new standard English, based on the London dialect but including features from all dialectal areas. From the time of the First Crusade (1095), English speakers from all over the nation congregated periodically in coastal towns to sail to the Holy Land. The rise in popularity of pilgrimages also brought speakers of many dialects together; Canterbury became a popular goal of pilgrims shortly after Thomas à Becket's assassination there in 1170. There were many other shrines popular with the English, both in England and on the Continent.

By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the children of the English nobility no longer learned French as their native language and had to be taught

it, either by imported teachers or by being sent overseas. For about three hundred years after the Conquest, French was the language in which Latin was taught in the schools, but by the late fourteenth century, English was the normal medium of instruction. The rapid decline in knowledge and use of French during this period is evidenced by rules requiring the use of French and by the appearance of books designed to teach people French.

1348–1509: ENGLISH TRIUMPHANT

French remained the official language of England until well into the second half of the fourteenth century, but two events of that century sealed its fate and guaranteed the resurgence of English. The first of these events was the Black Death (bubonic and/or pneumonic plague). The first cases appeared in England in 1348, and successive outbreaks followed every few years for the next three hundred years. Because this epidemic was the first of its kind to strike Europe since the sixth century A.D., the population was extremely susceptible. Roughly one-third of the people in England died of the Black Death between 1348 and 1351. The resulting social turmoil is easy to imagine.

Because of the high mortality rate of the Black Death, labor shortages became chronic, and surviving workers demanded higher pay for their labor. Despite laws designed to keep peasants on the farms, many used the accompanying upheavals and social disorganization to escape to the freedom of towns and cities where they could earn more. Wages increased in spite of legislation fixing them. Like it or not, the ruling classes were forced to respect the lower classes because they needed them so badly. This respect increased the prestige of English, which was the only language of the lower classes.

The second event that assured the resurgence of English in England was the Hundred Years War (1337–1453). In this intermittent conflict between England and France, England had several notable successes such as the famous victories at Crécy (1346), Poitiers (1356), and Agincourt (1415). But the French, galvanized into action by Joan of Arc, eventually defeated the English, and England lost all her Continental holdings except the port of Calais. Once England was without French possessions, the English no longer had important practical reasons to learn and use French.

Well before the end of the Hundred Years War, however, French had already become an artificially maintained second language in England, even among the nobility. By the mid-fourteenth century, English was widely used as the language of instruction in schools. In 1362, English became the official language of legal proceedings. The kings of England had spoken English for some time. The number of manuscripts written in English increased enormously in this same century. By the fifteenth century, English was more common in legal documents than either French or Latin.

Unpopular as France and the French were in England during the Hundred Years War, the substitution of English for French as the official language was not a policy decision based on animosity toward France. Rather, it was the

recognition of a *fait accompli*; by the end of the fourteenth century, everyone in England spoke English, and even those who spoke French were bilingual in English. Further, English had supplanted not only French but also the Norse spoken in the Danelaw. Much more slowly, but just as inexorably, it was also supplanting the Celtic languages spoken in Wales, Cornwall, and Scotland.

Throughout the period, great dialectal differences persisted in the English spoken (and written) in various parts of the country. At the same time, however, a standard spoken and written English based on the London dialect was emerging. This new standard was not to replace the dialects; instead, it was superimposed upon them. And this London dialect is the basis of all the national standards of today, not just Received Pronunciation (the upper-class standard) in Britain, but also the standard versions of American, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, South African, and Indian English.

London English was a logical and obvious basis for a standard language. London speech was essentially an East Midlands dialect, but the city attracted people from all over the country and its speech was to some extent influenced by all these other dialects. It was, therefore, a natural compromise dialect. As the largest city, the major seaport, and the biggest commercial center of the nation, London automatically had a prestige that carried over to its speech. London was near the court at Westminster, and the court lent its glamour to London. When, toward the end of the fifteenth century, printing came to England, the printers set up their establishments in London and printed their books in the London dialect. As these books spread throughout the country, they brought the written version of London English with them. The greatly increased literacy of the fifteenth century meant that more and more people were exposed to this rising standard dialect.

The ascendancy of Henry VIII to the throne in 1509 coincides with the end of the Middle English period. The revival of English as the national language of England was assured, and a national standard English based on London speech was being disseminated throughout the country by means of the printed word.

Inner History

MIDDLE ENGLISH PHONOLOGY

W 6.5

Historians of the English language are fortunate in having fairly extensive written records from at least one dialect of Old English. They are less fortunate with respect to the early stages of Middle English. Because the Norman Conquest made French the official language of England for about three hundred years, English was written down relatively infrequently, especially during the period 1100–1200. Yet the English language was changing rapidly, and dialectal differences were becoming, if anything, even greater than during Anglo-Saxon times. By the time English was once again written down regularly, many changes had occurred in all aspects of the language. The match between the sound system and the spelling was much worse than in Old English. French scribes (most of